

Queer Artists in Their Own Words: Kiyan Williams Uses Dirt to Unearth the Exploitation of Black People in America

LGBTQ Pride Month is now. Every day in June, we are celebrating the community by featuring one queer artist and letting them speak for themselves.

by Zachary Small – June 19, 2019



The month of June is a time to celebrate the LGBTQ community and reflect on the advances of queer people to strengthen civil liberties around the world, even in a moment of great political uncertainty. It's also a good opportunity to spotlight the richness and diversity of culture we have within the community. Hyperallergic is commemorating Pride Month by featuring one contemporary queer artist per day on the website and letting them speak for themselves. [Click here to participate.](#)

Kiyan Williams

Age: 28

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Location: New York City

Artistic Medium: Sculpture, Performance, Video

Who are you and what do you do?

I'm a Pisces and artist born in Newark, New Jersey. My work thinks through the relationship between Blackness, trans/gressive subjectivities, and ecology. In my recent work, I excavate residue from sites of loss within the African Diaspora: slave castles and sugar plantations in the Caribbean and American South; the archives of Black gay artists who died of HIV/AIDS; and a lowincome residential building in West Harlem demolished by commercial developers. To borrow the words of Saidiya Hartman, "I am intent on tracing an itinerary of destruction." Working primarily in sculpture, video, and performance, I am attracted to materials that are silent witnesses to the historical and ongoing dispossession of Black people in America.

What are the top three greatest influences on your work?

Black feminist and queer texts (Thomas Glave's *Among the Bloodpeople: Politics and Flesh*), rhythm and blues from the 1990s, and mycelium.

Describe your coffee order.

Two creams and two sugars.

What is your greatest accomplishment?

Giving myself permission to exist on my terms. Period.

What constitutes a perfect day?

Arriving from my dreams into a still and quiet morning; laying silently in bed for an hour after; having coffee plus an aimless walk down 125th Street and saying good morning to the people I pass; a few uninterrupted hours in the studio; a few hours in the library; a voguing session with some friends; dinner and drinks with a good sis; and ending the night shaking my kitty kat to some Jersey club music. All done without answering a single email and little interaction with a phone or computer!

What was your favorite exhibition from last year?

God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin curated by Hilton Als at David Zwirner.

What would your superpower be if you had one?

Being able to articulate and express my feelings to others without speaking them.

What is one question you wish somebody would ask about your work?

The real story about why I use dirt and soil as my primary materials.

What is the greatest threat to humanity?

The systems of extraction and exploitation that undergird violences enacted on people and the land.

What did you make when you first started making art?

T-shirt and bandanas for friends who passed away.

What is your all-time favorite work of art?

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Sula by Toni Morrison

What are your plans for pride month?

Avoiding and evading corporate-cis-gay pride.

What is the future of queerness?

Reparations for all Black people.

Greatest queer icon of the internet: Babadook, Momo, or a pervading sense of existential angst?

A pervading sense of existential angst.

Is there enough support for queer artists where you live?

No.

How do you stay cool during the summer?

Rosé and a cute rooftop situation.

What is your favorite type of milk?

Yikes! We don't do milk.

"Queer Artists in Their Own Words" is an ongoing feature happening every day in the month of June. For prior posts in the series, please [click here](#).